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Cities and the Environment (CATE)

Volume 8

Issue 2 *Urban Vacant Land and Community Access*

Article 19

10-8-2015

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Recommended Citation

Helphand, Ben R. (2015) "Permanently Grassroots with NeighborSpace," *Cities and the Environment (CATE)*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 19.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cate/vol8/iss2/19>

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Permanently Grassroots with NeighborSpace

The history of community gardening in North America has followed a boom and bust cycle; expanding in times of crisis only to retract when a feeling of security returns. This jarring cycle is facilitated by a view of community gardens as a temporary, pop-up, land-use. By framing gardens from the onset as ephemeral it is assumed that they will one day be replaced by a “higher and better use.” In order to break out of this cycle and have a permanent place in the urban geography it is imperative that models are developed that provide both long-term land security and can navigate the vicissitudes of community interest. In Chicago in the mid 1990s NeighborSpace was created in order to walk this difficult line. As Chicago’s only non-profit land trust dedicated to community managed open spaces, NeighborSpace provides long-term protection for more than 100 vegetable, flower and prairie gardens across the City. The organization shoulders the responsibilities of property ownership so that community groups can focus on the business of gardening and organizing. This article takes a close look at two gardens secured in perpetuity by NeighborSpace.

Keywords

Chicago, Community Garden, Land Trust

INTRODUCTION

NeighborSpace is the only nonprofit urban land trust in Chicago that preserves and sustains gardens on behalf of dedicated community groups. The organization takes on the responsibilities of property ownership so that community groups can focus on gardening and building community. It also assists with an array of stewardship issues such as gaining access to water, fixing broken infrastructure, leadership transitions and emergencies such as a downed tree or someone driving through a fence, which might otherwise derail a community garden over the long-term. Though community members have often already established their gardens when they approach NeighborSpace, the organization's work still begins with extensive environmental testing to ensure that the land is safe. If we determine that the land is appropriate and we are able to purchase it then liability coverage is extended to all garden activities and the site can receive a property tax exemption. If NeighborSpace can successfully acquire a site, it holds the title *forever* and cannot be uprooted.

NeighborSpace was created in 1996 through an intergovernmental agreement between the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. The vision was to permanently sustain and oversee community-established and maintained open spaces that were not part of the traditional park and preserve systems. Community gardens and urban agriculture have a long history in Chicago, but only one exception a World War I-era Victory Garden on the City's South Side, was not replaced when a so-called better use of the land came along¹. Like other cities in the U.S. at the time, Chicago has gone through quick expansions of community gardening during times of crisis such as during World Wars I and II and the economic recessions in the 1970s and 2000s. These gardens closed down just as quickly when the crises subsided². By helping to create NeighborSpace, governmental and nonprofit partners broke free from this boom and bust cycle. They carved out a process by which community gardens could become a permanent part of the urban fabric³. Each year NeighborSpace expands as more and more community-established gardening efforts are preserved. In 2015, the area of the city covered by NeighborSpace-protected community gardens will surpass 23.1 acres on more than 100 sites; each one a unique expression of the community that created it. To provide context, 23.1 acres is 17 football fields of green space and many of these sites are located in the most underserved parts of the city.

LONG-TERM LAND MANAGEMENT: CHICAGO'S VACANT ACRES

As an organization, NeighborSpace exists between government and community. It is like an estuary where the saltwater of government agencies mix with the freshwater of communities. In this delicate ecosystem, community gardens are allowed to grow deep roots. The requirements for insurance, leases, testing, permits and other hurdles that would drown gardens elsewhere are addressed. They are also insulated from the inconsistencies of voluntary community stewardship, which has proven to be the demise of countless community-managed gardens however good the

¹ Rainbow Beach Victory Garden - <http://rbvg7900.wix.com/rbvg7900>

² Laura Lawson 2005, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in North America*, University of California Press.

³ NeighborSpace was one of the recommendations of the 1998 CitySpace Plan: An Open Space Plan for Chicago. http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/cityspace_plan.html

initial intent⁴. When a NeighborSpace-protected site is faced with challenges, such as lack of interest or leadership capacity, it does not revert to vacancy. One of the strengths of NeighborSpace is that its staff works with the community to re-establish, deepen and/or expand community environmental stewardship.

Most of the sites that NeighborSpace protects were originally city-owned vacant land. As such, the organization works very closely with the Chicago Department of Planning and Development to secure city land for community gardens and urban agriculture. However, city government doesn't choose these lots. Rather, community groups come to NeighborSpace with existing or planned projects and want NeighborSpace to preserve the land. The City of Chicago donates land to NeighborSpace and, in many cases, invests in the garden infrastructure because successive administrations and city council members have prioritized these community spaces, but also because our process is predictable. NeighborSpace vets applicants thoroughly and establishes ongoing relationships with community stewards so that the land will be maintained for the long-term.

A TALE OF TWO COMMUNITY GARDENS

NeighborSpace recently catalyzed the generation of the La Huerta Roots and Rays Garden. For decades this odd, triangular-shaped parcel sat unused. It was one of the few city-owned parcels of land in the Pilsen neighborhood, home to one of Chicago's largest Mexican-American communities. Several groups had established small gardens on the site over the years only to see them abandoned. In 2011, leaders with another iteration of the garden applied to NeighborSpace for protection of the garden's land on their behalf. At the time, the group lacked the level of community support that NeighborSpace requires so we deferred their application, but encouraged them to keep building support so that we could revisit the application in the future.

Frequently, proposals are brought to NeighborSpace for garden projects that simply "do not have much community in the community garden." No community-led project can ever be completely secure, but our experience has shown that true community involvement immensely improves a project's long-term success. Therefore, in order to foster resiliency among garden leadership, NeighborSpace requires a community organization partner (usually a block club, church or community development corporation), at least three garden leaders or contacts (organized however the garden group wishes), and at least 10 stakeholders from the community. If a group is unable to find this minimal level of support, we recommend that they rethink their plan. We walk a fine line with these rules, balancing the need for local leadership with the reality that communities change over time. Our target is to protect gardens that can be sustained for the long-term under independent local leadership. We refer to this strategy as being "permanently grassroots." In support of this ideal, NeighborSpace meddles with the management of the gardens as little as possible. We do require loose standards for safety and insurance purposes, but, beyond that, step out of the way so community can act.

⁴ The National Community Garden Survey 2011-2012 found that 37% of the gardens that were lost in the previous 5 years were lost due to lack of community interest.
<http://communitygarden.rutgers.edu/files/Lawson%20and%20Drake%20community%20garden%20survey%20report.pdf>

Several iterations of garden leaders at La Huera Roots and Rays built an impressive organization with deeper community connections by leveraging creative partnerships with local institutions and by including more neighbors in the raised bed garden plots. Eventually, NeighborSpace agreed to move forward with the conservation process beginning with environmental assessments. Unfortunately, results of soil tests showed very high levels of lead in a three-foot stretch along one side of the garden. Left as is, NeighborSpace could not ensure the safety of gardeners and, as such, we would not move forward with the acquisition.

Based on our policy, problematic environmental reports can stop garden projects in their tracks unless remediation funding is available. One way to raise funds for such cases in Chicago is the Open Space Impact Fee Funds (OSIF)⁵. A small fee is assessed from developments in the City and collected by Chicago's 77 community areas. The accrued funds can only be used with alderman's support in that community area for new open space projects. NeighborSpace was able to apply for OSIF funds in the Pilsen community area to do the necessary remediation and some of the garden reconstruction. The land was transferred to NeighborSpace which then worked with contractors to have the contaminated portions of the garden removed. Meanwhile, there was an exhaustive community design process that the local garden management group developed that would later become an award winning redesign⁶. Today La Huerta Roots and Rays enjoys permanent protection under NeighborSpace and is a shining example of a successful community-managed garden.

At its core, NeighborSpace is a land trust, committed to preserving places in Chicago for community created and managed open spaces forever. We don't use the word forever lightly. But we think that it is important to emphasize that fact since permanence is an important step for community gardens that have had an ephemeral past and exist within the ever-changing reality of communities.

There are a number of examples where, were it not for NeighborSpace, a permanent community space would not exist today. Most recently, there is the example of the former 61st and Dorchester Community Garden, in Chicago's Woodlawn Neighborhood, which is just South of Hyde Park, home of the University of Chicago. In 2000, residents formalized a garden on University-owned land. By many accounts, the garden had existed in various forms since the '80s.⁷ but at the turn of the millennium, 135 households came together to tend to 100 square foot plots. In an area where almost every space belonged to or was laid claim by someone or some group, the garden was neutral and respected. "This is like a sanctuary," explained one gardener, Mike. "People won't mess with you in here,"⁸ he continued. The garden was woven into people's lives physically and socially; for those without yards it was their outdoor space, different from a park since they could make it their own. Gardeners were bound together in a web of mutual support. Perhaps most importantly, there is the lesson of humility that the garden teaches. As one gardener recounted, "That experience of trying it and then the immediate thought

⁵ http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/open_space_impactfee.html

⁶ <http://rootsandrays.weebly.com/>

⁷ <https://web.archive.org/web/20130928032459/http://www.invisibleinstitute.com/stories/garden/content/2009/03/61st-street-community-garden-at-risk>

⁸ <http://the.invisible.institute/garden-conversations/>

of ‘well next year I’ll...’ simply opens up time. And it opens up life and it opens up hope. Whatever’s going on today, there’s always next year.”

At NeighborSpace, we work to preserve gardens not merely or even primarily for their beauty. Rather, we value these kinds of difficult-to-measure benefits shared by the 61st and Dorchester gardeners. Land, preserved for community creation and recreation, is simply the vehicle for all the garden’s fruits. Unfortunately, NeighborSpace could serve no formal role with the 61st and Dorchester Garden since the land was owned by the University and they had no interest in selling. Even with decades of strong roots in the community there was no guarantee that the University would allow the garden to remain there in the long-term and, as such, it was always vulnerable.

In 2009, the garden was uprooted to serve as a construction staging area. But the impacted community was ready with a new plan. Even before the garden was removed, NeighborSpace was approached by the garden’s leaders to work with them on a “Plan B.” While they strongly advocated for the University of Chicago to keep the garden, they had the forethought to plan for the worst. This is rarely the case - every year we are approached by gardens when it is too late to save the site or we are rebuffed by gardens who don’t think they’ll ever be displaced.

To preserve the community’s space, we identified two city-owned vacant lots one block to the south straddling Dorchester Avenue and a park district playlot. The garden moved there in 2010. It was reborn on the new sites as the “62nd and Dorchester Community Garden.” Some of the original soil, gardeners and plants made the one block journey and some did not. The site was raised up with mulch and fresh compost that was formed into a grid. A snow fence was erected and a connection to a nearby hydrant secured. Always trying to be a good neighbor, the garden set the fence back a few feet and planted community beds outside the fence, inviting everyone, even those without a dedicated garden bed, to pick and taste.

In Chicago, alderman control most decisions surrounding land use in their wards, especially when it comes to transferring city-owned land. The alderman, who had been an active gardener in another NeighborSpace site nearby, supported the move but was reluctant to sign off on permanent transfer of the land. He was concerned about community commitment to this and other proposed community garden sites in his ward. So, at his discretion, he instituted a three-year rule for new community gardens; new gardens would have to demonstrate success for three seasons before he would support their preservation under the NeighborSpace land trust. Though the garden had roots going back more than a decade, we understood the Alderman’s hesitancy. The garden group and NeighborSpace had to wait until the fall of 2013 before we could pursue preservation. During those years it was crucial to continue to maintain and build support with the alderman.

The community garden world can cultivate a political atmosphere, but the reality is that community gardening is an inherently radical act because it creates a space apart from the norms of the real estate market, which tends to see buildings as the highest and best use of urban land;

and contemporary maintenance regimens, which favor professional landscapers. In urban areas in particular, when dealing with land, nothing is innocent and however misguided the tendency, there is incredible distrust of spaces stewarded by a collective. Conventional logic sees that these lots and others have value for the city as a potential part of the tax base. As such, building and nurturing political support is as essential as watering and compost. To ask elected officials and bureaucrats to set these preconceived notions aside, garden leaders have to make a strong case. NeighborSpace has seen too many gardens never take root because the garden leaders were on the wrong side of a politician and unwilling or unable to strategically build a case for their project. The 62nd and Dorchester Gardeners recognized this fact and worked with the alderman to cultivate support. One strategy they employed was a survey of their gardeners, proving that the garden brought together a healthy mix of constituents.

As with Roots and Rays, environmental safety came up as an issue for the 62nd and Dorchester Community Garden. When a site is considered permanent, the legal threshold is raised. The owner takes on liability for the site in perpetuity and the risks associated with known and unknown contaminants become more acute. NeighborSpace conducts exhaustive environmental assessments of every site we acquire. In order to be prepared for our three-year deadline, we solicited an application from the garden group during the second year and were able to move ahead. The results for the new 62nd and Dorchester Community Garden showed elevated levels of lead - even in some of the new raised beds. It would cost more than \$10,000 to clean up and contain the contaminated soil. Unlike with Roots and Rays, no city funds were found to pay for the cleanup. In this case, eventually, NeighborSpace and the city were able to secure several grants from private foundations to conduct the necessary work. But very often lack of access to such funding can stop a permanent garden project before it even starts.

The 62nd and Dorchester Community garden was fortunate to have land available nearby and NeighborSpace as a resource. Most gardens with non-permanent land tenure arrangements do not have any recourse. Many don't even take root in the first place due to the uncertainty of land tenure. This is to say, because in many situations garden groups can't obtain formal permission to use land for the long-term, they choose not to move forward with their projects in the first place. These are the gardens that were never planted. One lesson is that greater supports are needed for gardens using institutional land. They will never be completely secure. But clearer expectations (both for the gardens and the institutions) would reduce uncertainty and open the door to more longer-term garden projects.

CONCLUSION

Though it took years of community organizing, time, political support and funding to secure the 62nd and Dorchester Community Garden, in 2025 they will not be asked to leave as they were previously. The gardeners of the 62nd and Dorchester Community Garden and of the La Huerta Roots and Rays Garden can now grow apple and peach trees and expect to harvest the fruit. They can plan events that will evolve into community traditions. Children can grow up in the garden, help to lead the garden, and one day bring their children to the garden. All this is possible because the space is held in a liminal state; it is not exactly private and not exactly public. It is owned by NeighborSpace who holds the title and satisfies insurance requirements and other obligations of property ownership. More importantly, it is not governed or stewarded by

NeighborSpace; these spaces and 100 others are run by community partners. In these places, and few others in today's cities, communities can use their hand to directly impact their environment.

About the author: Ben Helphand is the Executive Director of NeighborSpace, a nonprofit urban land trust dedicated to preserving and sustaining community managed open spaces in Chicago. NeighborSpace shoulders the responsibility of property ownership for a network of 109 flower, vegetable and prairie gardens across the City, so that community groups can focus on gardening and community building. Originally from Oregon, Helphand came to Chicago to pursue a degree in the history of religion from the University of Chicago and then went on to Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.